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Studying the contemporary practice turn and methods in participatory practice research

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STUDYING CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE TURN AND METHODS IN PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE RESEARCH

When research on social work practices is conducted, researchers might aim to inform practice, yet isolate the foundation of the research from the practitioners who are likely to apply such knowledge in practice and thereby promote potential improvements. Participatory practice research, as an example of practice-informed research, strives for enhancements by involving e.g. practitioners and service users to make inquiries about relevant research questions to raise and more. Involvement in my research means participation: either as part of a data-target group of practitioners or as participants of an advisory-like practice board. However, if scholars discuss practices as subtle and/or common sense contexts, difficulties emerge in enhancing practice and grasping the practice agents. We have to discuss understandings of practice and methods to be able to study practice under conditions with practice represented in fostering the conducted research.

I argue for a theoretical model of contemporary practice theory with emphasis on performing practice agents (Schatzki 2002; Buch and Schatzki eds. 2019) to inform research methodology and advance research methods. My on-going participatory practice research suggests Schatzki's (2002) performative understanding of practice as a concept to investigate the focal point and accentuate practitioners' participation in both social work and research practices. In such an approach, research methods reflect the field of the study and the knowledge-production. Fundamental to my PhD studies, practitioners participate both by discussing, informing and qualifying the nature and structure of the research and co-produce data by sharing their experiences and practice wisdom. Empirical data co-produced by practitioners who share their knowledge, involvement and understanding of practices implicates sensitive working-relationships between researchers and practitioners. In a qualitative research method perspective, multiple approaches might share similarities and differences in opportunities to study slices of practice.

As I give emphasis to qualitative methods and find potency in combinations of methods with the ability to investigate various shapes and sizes of knowledge, involvement and understanding of social work practices, which portray aspects of performed practices is the premise of the methods I selected: narrative in-depth interviews, told by practitioners and so-called practice portraits, written by practitioners. Whilst narrative interviews are widespread in social work research, the practice portrait is less developed. The method emerged in German Critical Psychology based on theory-practice conferences and represents as qualitative "surveys" written by practitioners as a tool to structure systematic descriptions of daily psychology-practice and an aim to intensify and develop practice. Conducting research with such method-combinations facilitate the practitioners' influence on more than the data material; methodological comments and questions were raised by the interviewed practitioners and not only by the advisory practice board. Methods can function as more than means to produce data by generating feedback to and questioning the research in the making - if we as researchers dare to listen carefully.

Systematic considerations about (the combinations of) methods and principles associated with knowledge-production encompass opportunities for raising practice-informed research generating paradigms and sustainable knowledge.